Angela Crampton · May 27, 2021 · 13 min read

Fly Fishing 101–The Basics

Updated: Jul 13, 2022

United Women on the Fly founder, Heather Hodson, shares her expertise on how to get started fly fishing. This online class is geared towards someone who has never picked up a fly rod or has minimal experience.

United Women on the Fly (UWOTF)

A community that focuses on connection, education, and resources.

Mission: United Women on the Fly (UWOTF) is committed to building an inclusive community that educates, provides resources, encourages, and connects anglers (mostly women) from all backgrounds into the sport of fly fishing. We will advocate for equitable outdoor opportunities and representation for ALL women. UWOTF acknowledges that our events and photos shared take place on traditional, unceded Indigenous lands.

Facebook / Facebook Group / Instagram / Website

Catch and release principles

Many fly anglers do practice catching and releasing fish. If you do want to catch and release, you can find the principles and tips at Keep Fish Wet to reduce the amount of harm done to the fish you catch.

United Women of the Fly does support eating local or the legal harvest of fish.

Fish anatomy & physiology

The heart is between and under the gills and liver, just above the Pectoral fins. Gripping a fish in the pectoral area using inward force and squeezing pressure will compress the heart and maybe the liver and gills.

Know the regulations

As a new angler, you might not know you need a fishing license or the specific regulations for the local waters you're fishing. In Washington State, it's illegal to physically take a wild steelhead out of the water. In order to find the local regulations near you, go to the state or county and look up fish regulations. You can also find resources where you buy your fishing license.

Why fly fishing?

First and foremost, fly fishing is FUN, family friendly, nerdy, challenging, and rewarding. Not to mention, fish don't live in ugly places, so if you're getting frustrated, take a break and look around.

What is fly fishing?

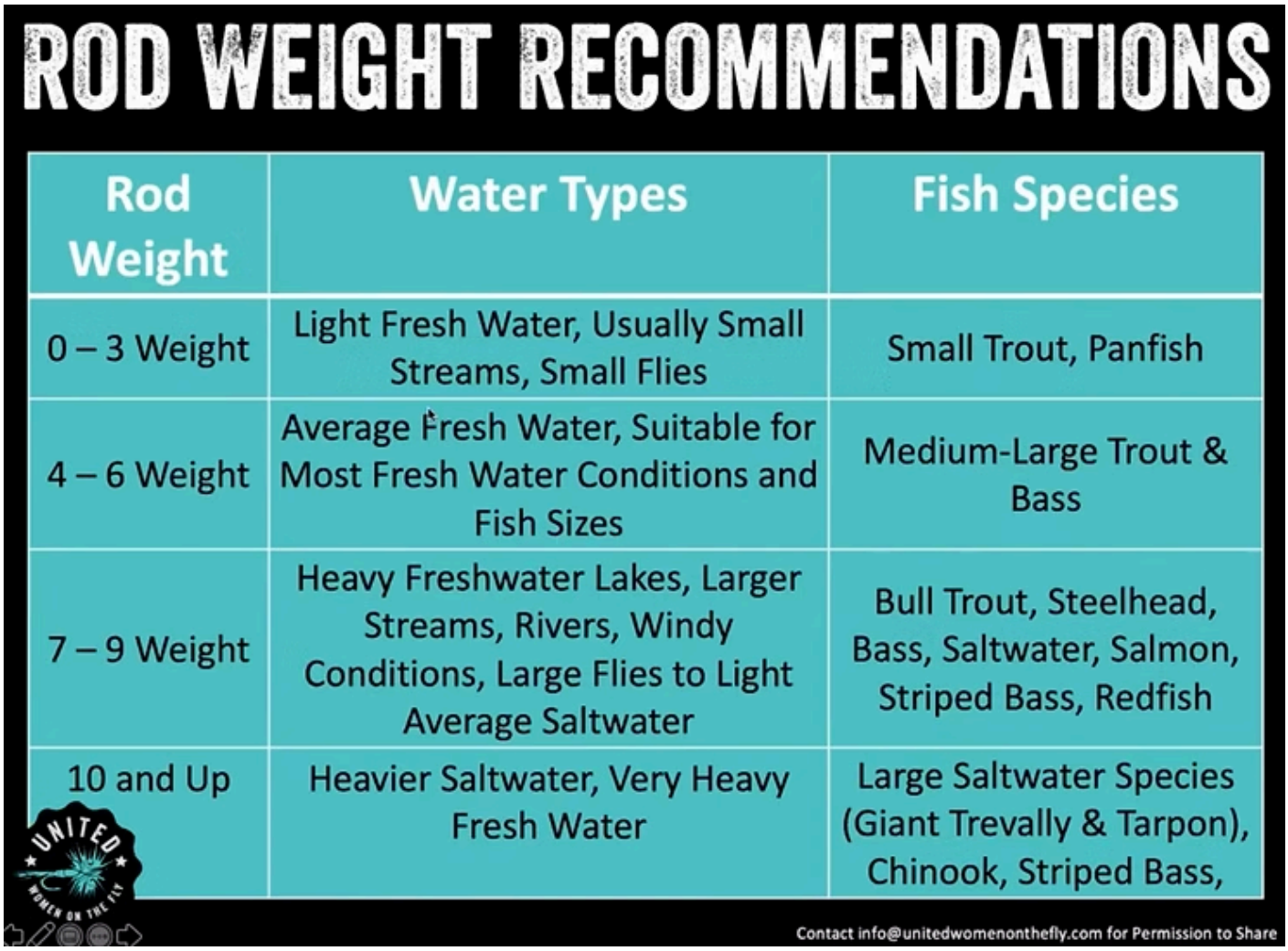
Fly fishing is when the angler casts the line, not the bait (or lure). In fly casting, the fly line casts the fly versus weighted lure or bait carrying the line. When you're fly fishing, the angler is imitating or mimicking what the fish are actually eating whether it's an insect underwater or above water and/or can be some kind of bait fish.

Equipment / fly fishing gear

Below we'll share an introduction to the fly fishing gear you'll need to start. As you continue your fly fishing journey, you can dive deeper into the technical fundamentals of the gear you'll need for the areas and types of fish.

Fly rods

Fly rod weight is the number designation to the overall power or size of the fly rod. General rule is the smaller fly rod weight is equal to a smaller fish and the larger fly rod weight is equal to a larger fish. If you're trying to catch an average weight trout, the fly rod weight would range around 5 or 6.


ROD WEIGHT RECOMMENDATIONS
Rod Weight
Water Types
Fish Species
0 – 3 Weight
Light Fresh Water, Usually Small Streams, Small Flies
Small Trout, Panfish
4 – 6 Weight
Average Fresh Water, Suitable for Most Fresh Water Conditions and Fish Sizes
Medium-Large Trout & Bass
7 – 9 Weight
Heavy Freshwater Lakes, Larger Streams, Rivers, Windy Conditions, Large Flies to Light Average Saltwater
Bull Trout, Steelhead, Bass, Saltwater, Salmon, Striped Bass, Redfish
10 and Up
Heavier Saltwater, Very Heavy Fresh Water
Large Saltwater Species (Giant Trevally & Tarpon), Chinook, Striped Bass,
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Parts of a fly rod

Butt section is where the reel inserts into the rod to the cork handle. Connect the rod sections into the ferrules. The guides are the round pieces sticking off the rod pieces and might look different depending on the location of the guide on the rod. Each fly rod has a unique taper. The butt section (where the reel is attached) is thicker and each section of the rod is tapered to the tip top.

The fly rod sections can have one to eight (sometimes more) sections. The most common consists of a 4-piece rod with the following sections:

- Butt - The bottom, thick section of the rod.
- Butt Mid - Middle section, next to the butt.
- Top Mid - Middle section, next to the tip top.
- Tip Top - The section of the rod or blank farthest from the butt section.

Fly rods also come in different lengths. An example is if you are fishing a small creek that may only be seven feet across you probably don't want to use a long rod. The average fly rod length is nine feet. As your rivers get bigger, you might need a longer fly rod. With different types of fishing techniques, you might need a longer rod to mend your line. Mending your line is moving your fly line either up or downstream to have your fly moving at the same speed of the water. This is also called a dead drift and is the most natural presentation.

Fly rods can be made from three different materials: graphite, fiberglass, or bamboo. Graphite is the most common material.

Every fly rod company labels rods differently. Some examples are:

- Sage rod: 486-4 means 4 weight rod, 8 feet and 6 inches length, and 4 pieces.
- Scott rod: 8'8" 4 line means it is 8 foot and 8 inches rod length at a 4 weight.
- Winston rod: 8 ½ 4wt means 8 feet and 6 inches rod length at a 4 weight.

Rod action essentially is where the fly rod loads (bends). You can buy a different fly rod with a different action. There are four types of rod actions:

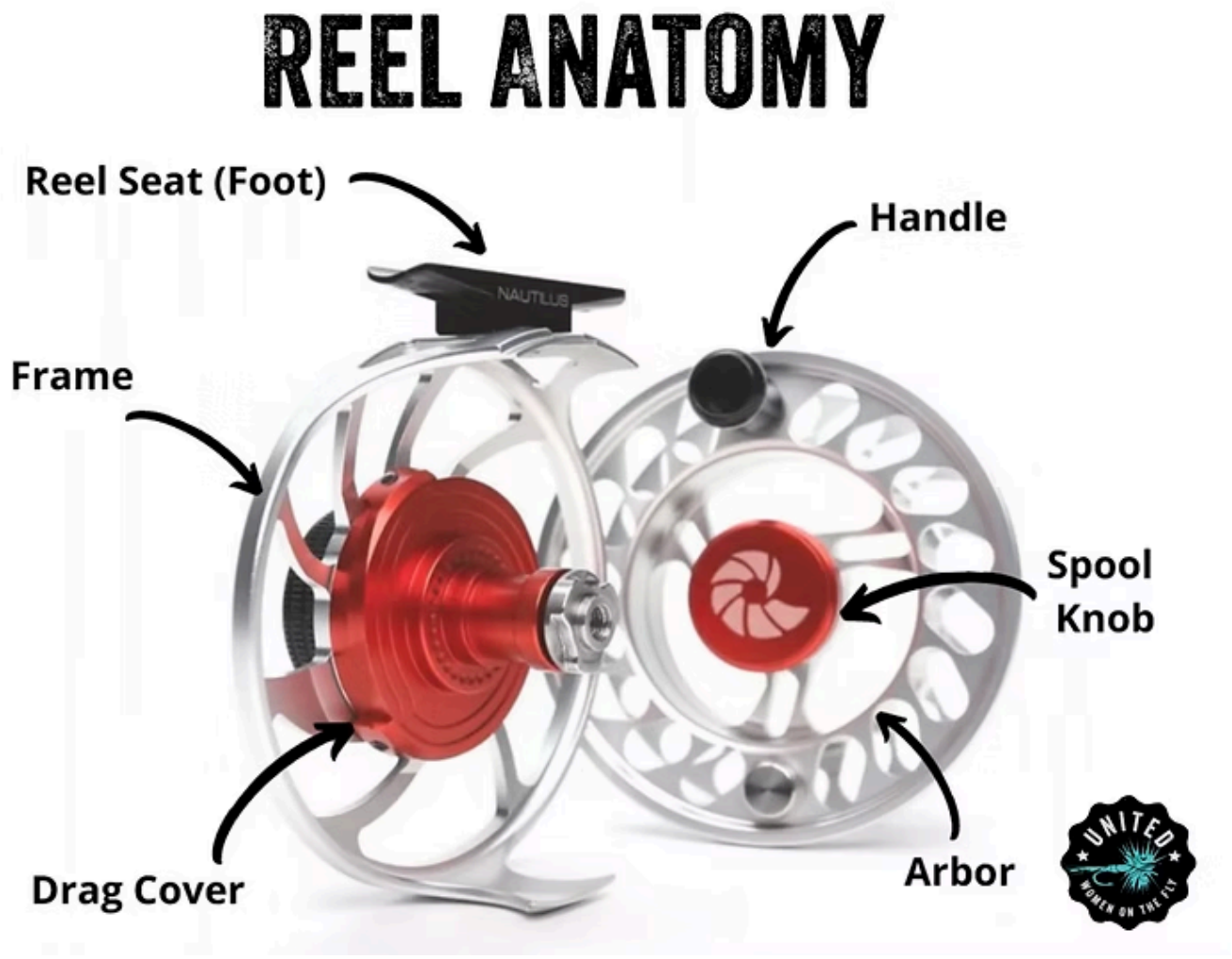
1. Fast action rods: Stiffer rods that barely bend at the tip top of the fly rod.
2. Moderate-fast action: The bend of the rod starts to come down or is lower on the fly rod giving it slightly more bend than a fast action.
3. Moderate action: The bend of the rod starts to come down or is lower on the fly rod giving it slightly more bend than a moderate-fast action.
4. Slow action: Usually a bamboo, or fiberglass rod material and bends lower and closer to the butt section of the rod.

What you want to get out of your rod action is if you have a slower action fly rod, you have to wait longer for your back or forward cast to unravel in front of you. For an average or a new angler, a moderate-fast or moderate action fly rod is recommended because you can really feel the action (bend or load) of that fly rod. Test out different action fly rods and embrace your uniqueness and what feels comfortable to you. Your preference might change as you become a better caster.

How do you know what the action is on your fly rod? Go to your local fly shop or go online and look at the manufacturer details and it will tell you what the action of your fly rod has.

Fly reels

The two main things to know about fly reels is the anatomy and the drag systems.



Reel seat (foot) is the piece that connects to the fly rod butt section. The frame of the reel. The handle is how you reel the fish in. An arbor is the center part of a fly reel where first backing and then line is wound. There's two types of arbors: a large size and a small one.The larger the arbor, the less line capacity and the large arbor means faster retriever. When you are purchasing a reel, think about what you are going to be using it for. Are you going to have a fat or thin fly line and/or are you going to be fishing saltwater. Saltwater anglers prefer larger arbor because when they are reeling, they are picking up more fly line and it's faster to reel in the fish on a large arbor.

Drag is a setting of tension on the line released from the reel. Drag comes into play more when you catch larger fish, especially saltwater fish, and you'll want one that is fully enclosed to keep saltwater away from the drag.

Don't forget to wash off your reels and rods with fresh water after each day of fishing before you store them.

Consider versatility when looking for a reel so you can use it in as many fishing scenarios as possible, like fresh and saltwater fishing.

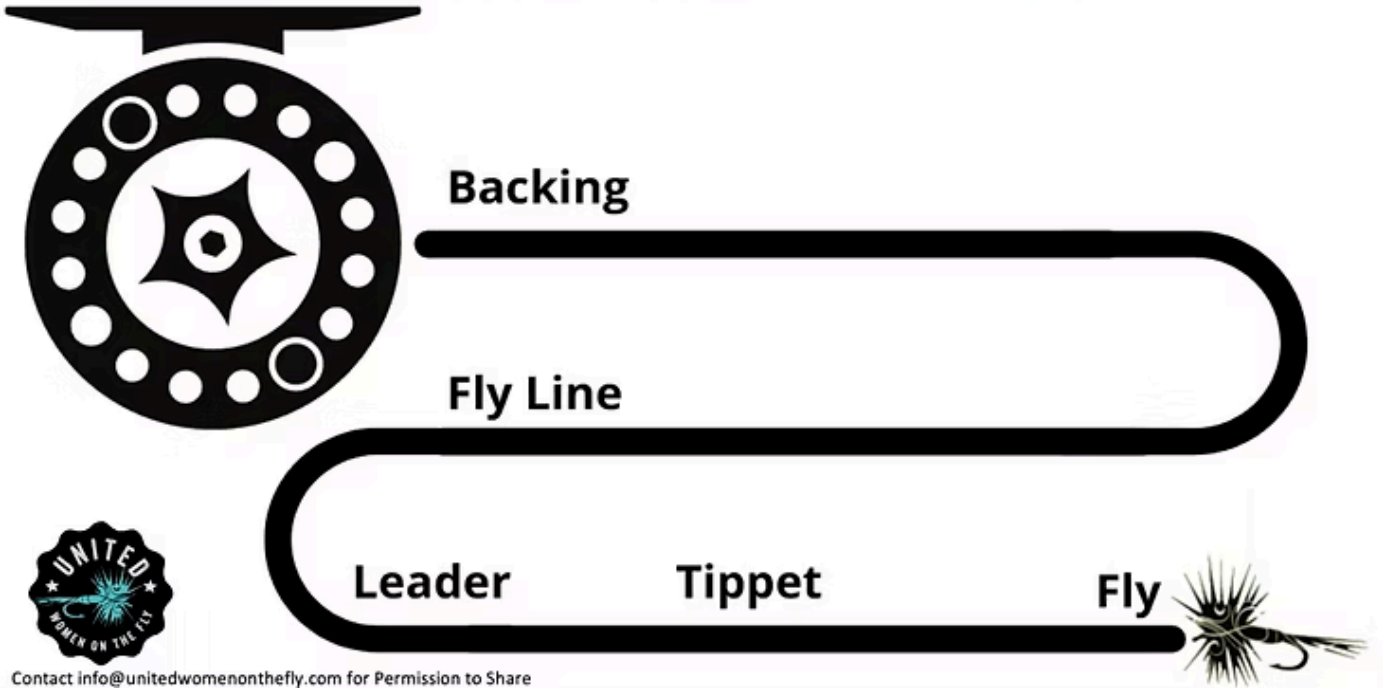
When you have your fly rod, you want to make sure it is matched up. In other words, you want your fly rod weight, fly reel weight, and fly line weight to match. For example, you have a 5 weight fly rod with a 5 weight reel and a 5 weight fly line on it.

Fly lines

A fly line is what is creating the weight in order to cast out a fly.

FLY LINE & BACKING

- **Backing** – Back-up to the fly line.
- **Fly Line** – "Heart" of fly fishing. The line provides the weight for casting. Typically, 90' and are designated by weight.



The backing is the backup to your fly line.

The fly line or the "heart" of fly fishing. The line provides the weight for casting and is typically 90 feet and are designated weights that match your rod and reel weights.

Types of fly lines

The whole purpose of the fly line is to transfer the cast energy from the fly rod out through the line and to the fly so it can be "presented" to the fish.

1. Floating – a floating fly line floats and is the most common fly line, used most of the time for flat water
2. Full sink – sinking line sinks. The rate at which a sinking fly line sinks is indicated by the type number. Type 1 has a slower sink rate than a Type 10. A full sink line is recommended more for lakes versus rivers.
3. Sink tip – sinking tip line combines both floating line and sinking line. With the sinking tip line, the majority of the line floats, but the last 10 or so feet sink. This option is great for both lakes, rivers, and oceans.

Basic fly rod set-ups

You can easily get a sticker shock when buying fly rod set-ups and unfortunately it can be expensive. There are some basic fly rod set-ups. There are so many companies out there and Treeline Review provides a great resource: The Best Beginner Fly Fishing Combos for 2021.

How to set-up your fly rod?

Heather demonstrates how to set-up your fly rod by connecting all the parts together. Go out in your yard or a place where you can assemble your rod for the first time and work your way through the video below.

Two take home tips from the video: 1) Be careful not to pull the tip of your fly line off the ground because you can dent or damage your reel and 2) Make sure all the fly line is up and through the guides before attaching the flies to the end of the line.

Leaders and tippet

As a new angler, the leader and tippet concepts might be harder to grasp.

Leaders

As a review, you have your reel then backing then fly line. Attached to your fly line, you're going to have a leader. A leader is a clear piece of monofilament or fluorocarbon. Some may be familiar with these materials used in conventional fishing.

- Leader – line that forms the link between the fly line and the fly.
- Tapered – helps to complete the transfer of energy from the rod to the fly line to the fly.
- Length – 3 feet to 20 feet. Average is 9 feet.
- Strength – pound test (X numbers). The average strength is 3-4X. As the X number goes up, the diameter goes down.

Tippet

Tippet is at the tip of your leader. The tip of the leader is assigned an "X" number to identify its diameter. As the number of the tippet goes up, the diameter goes down. A 3X is larger in diameter compared to a 5X. When purchasing a brand new leader, there is approximately 2 feet of tippet at the end of the leader.

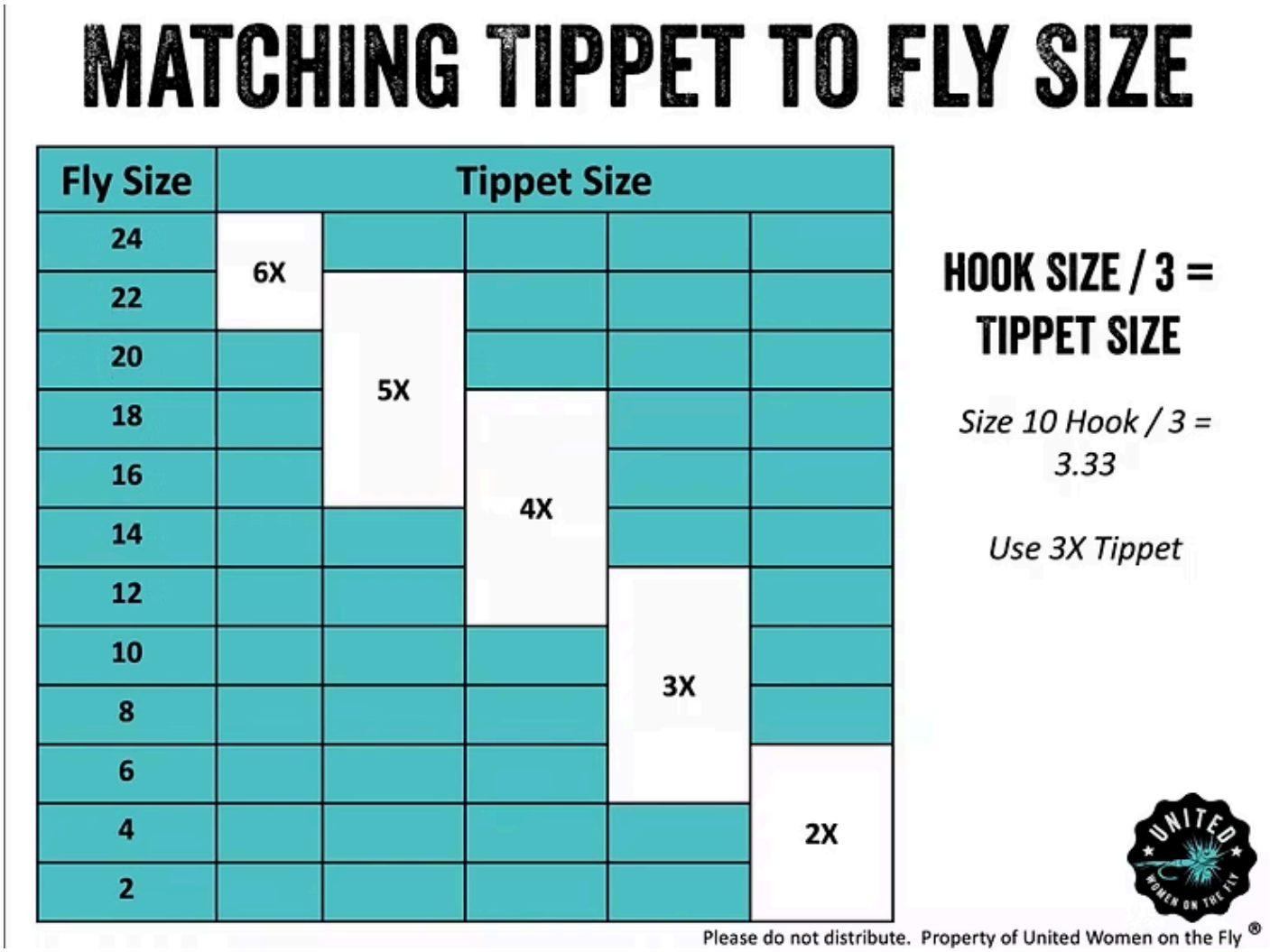
When you're tying on your tippet to your leader, you want to keep a tapered formula to transfer the energy from your fly rod to your fly line to your tapered leader to your fly. Example you'd tie on 3X then 4X then 5X.

Leader suggestion is a 9’ 3X leader for medium size trout, bass, and panfish. If you want to go smaller, you can tie on a 4X tippet to your leader.

Tippet is purchased in spools. Start with buying 3X, 4X and 5X spools to start. If you're going to be going into more technical trout areas, you might need 5.5X or 6X tippet spools.

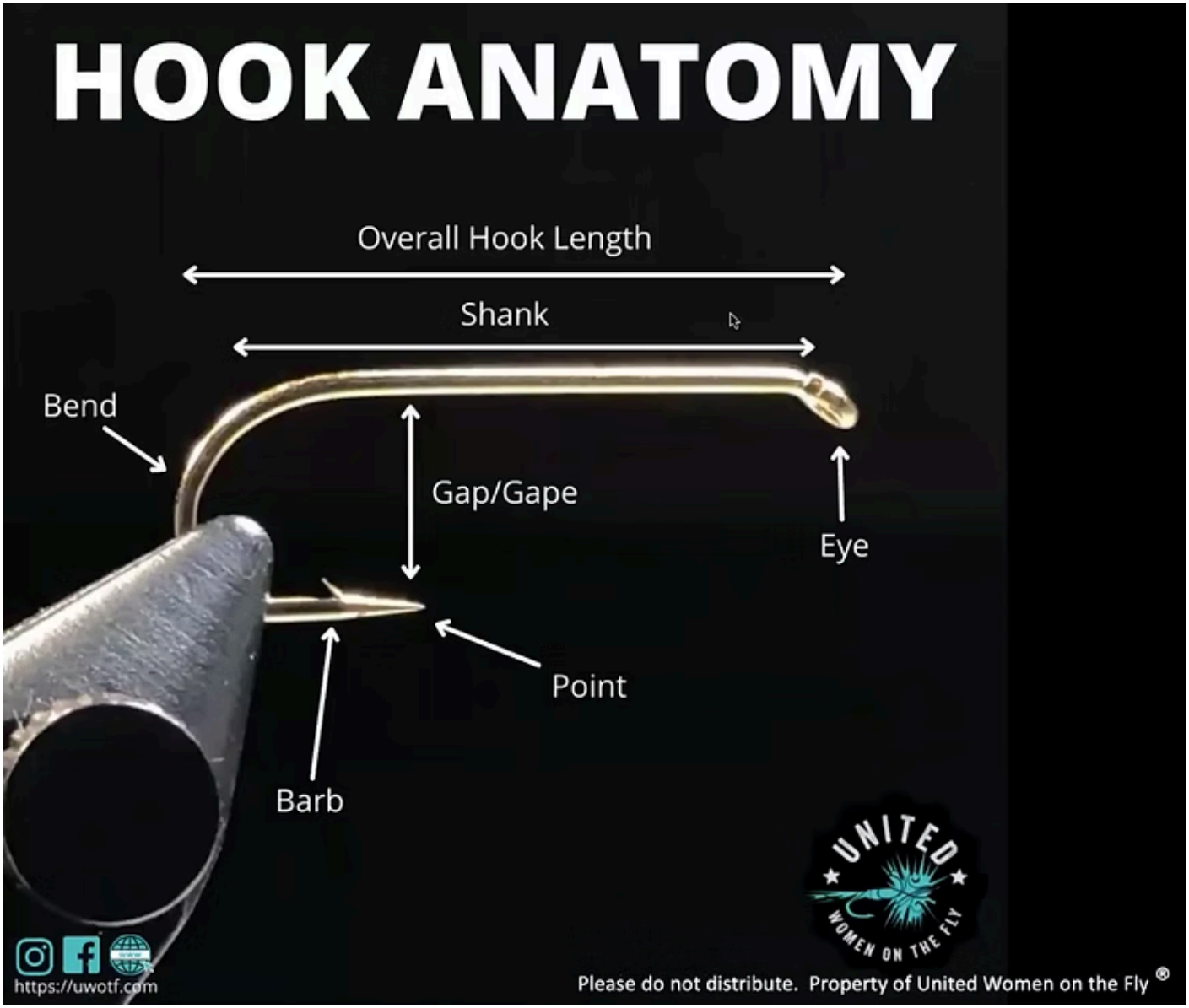
Monofilament takes over 800 years to break down. Fluorocarbon take 10,000 years. As an angler, it is our responsibility to properly dispose of this material. Several rivers and water access points have monofilament recycle tubes. If these are not accessible, then connect with your local fly shop or research where you can recycle monofilament. Bring all bits and pieces of clipped leader and tippet material home with you. This “microtrash” should be recycled.

Match your tippet size to your fly size:



Tippet Tip: Divide the hook size by 3. Example: a hook size of 12, divided by 3, equals a 4X tippet. A hook size of 8, divided by 3, equals 3X tippet. You can round up or down depending on what size tippet you have with you.

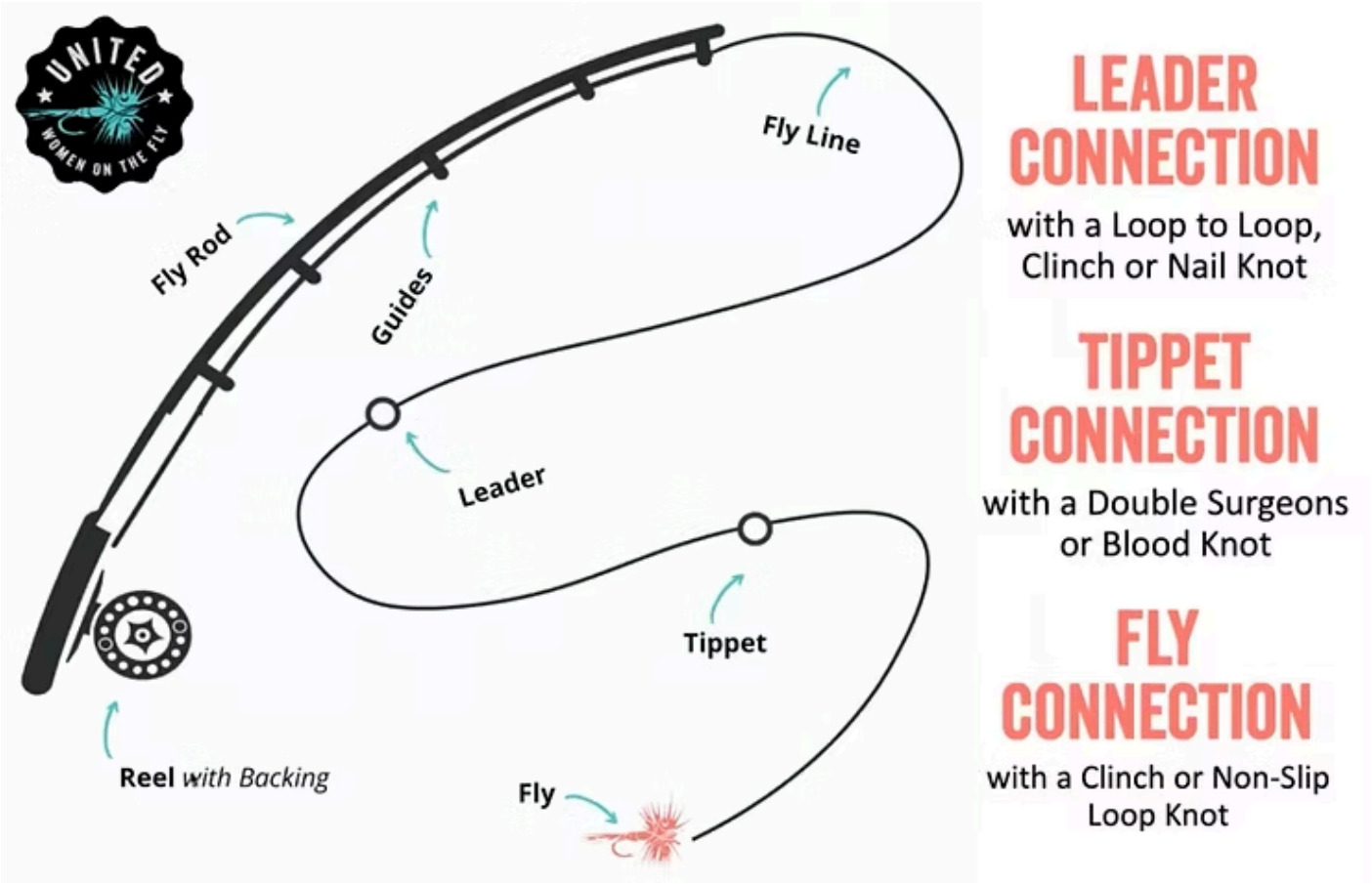
Hook anatomy



You have a hook, normally with features attached to it. You have the eye of the hook where the tippet threads through the hole to tie onto to attach the tipped to the hook. The eye is attached to the shank or the long, straight part of the hook. The bend of the hook goes to the barb and then the point of the hook.

What determines the size of the hook is the hook gap. The hook gap is the distance between the point and the shank.

Putting it all together



Next, you'll learn the knots to connect it all together.

Fly fishing basic knots

Practice your knots with paracord before using expensive and small fly fishing materials to learn the knots.

- Loop to loop – leader to fly line
- Double surgeon – tippet to leader or tippet to tippet
- Blood knot – tippet to leader or tippet to tippet
- Clinch knot – leader to fly line or tippet to fly

When tying knots

Leave a little insurance! When trimming your knot, leave yourself a small tag. If a fish isn't spooked by a leader coming to it, a small tag won't scare it either.

Add moisture. The purpose of moisture is to "seat" or fully tighten the know. It also reduces friction as it is tightened. The friction builds up heat which weakens the line and makes it more prone to break during a battle with a fish.

Pull the knot together slowly. Most knots which are damaged by friction are simply pulled tight too quickly.

Lastly, test your knot by tugging it to make sure it's secure. Better to know before a fish is on the hook and the knot comes undone when you're reeling it in.

Nippers

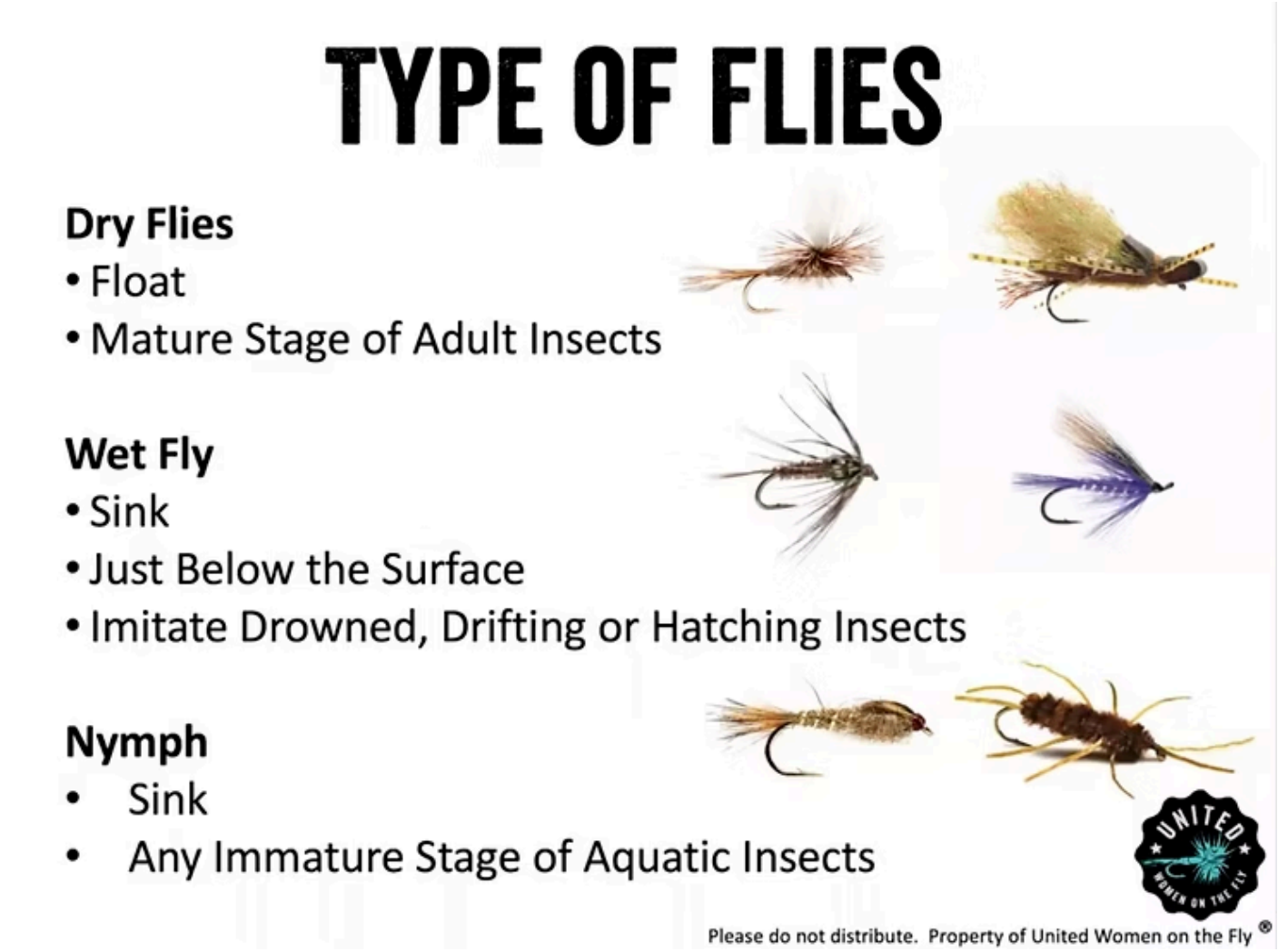
Nippers are used to cut or trim the tippet. Several brands make these or you can use toenail clippers. Nippers made for fly fishing usually have a poke needle to use for the eye of your hook.

Forceps

Forceps are used to remove the fly from the fish's mouth or to pinch the barbs.

Types of flies & rigging

Rigging means how you set up different systems in order to fish certain fishing techniques.


TYPE OF FLIES
Dry Flies
• Float
• Mature Stage of Adult Insects
Wet Fly
• Sink
• Just Below the Surface
• Imitate Drowned, Drifting or Hatching Insects
Nymph
• Sink
• Any Immature Stage of Aquatic Insects
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Remember, this is a 101 level course, so below is a quick introduction to types of flies.

- Dry flies – Floats and represents a mature stage of adult insects.
- Wet flies – Sinks just below the surface and imitates drowned, drifting, or hatching insects.
- Nymph – Sinks and is any immature stage of aquatic insects.

Ask yourself: What am I fishing for? What am I mimicking? Where does the insect need to be to catch a fish?

Fish normally feed subsurface, or underwater, 85% to 90% of the time. To be most successful, a fishing subsurface is going to give you the greatest chance of actually catching a fish.

You can combine dry flies with a dry dropper or a subsurface (nymph) dropper. You can connect the flies with a tippet, attaching the hook bend of one fly to the eye of the hook of the second fly. When you're fishing a dry fly, you may need to add some sort of floatant.

While you're fishing underwater, you're using a wet fly. Hatching insects means that the insect is at the bottom of the river and then they start to hatch and come up towards the water surface to become an adult. Fishing the hatching stage can be really, really productive.

The subsurface or a nymph keeps your flies under the water, sometimes with the help of weights. You can add a lighter nymph to the first one to have a different option for the fish to eat. You can also have a weight with two flies attached to the weight. Know your regulations because some waters do not allow lead weights or lead flies.

In addition to the flies, you'll need some strike indicators (or bobbers) in order to tell if the fish eats your fly.

As you progress in your fly fishing skills, you'll start to learn more about the insects and the stages of insect life as it pertains to the type of fish you're looking to catch.

Now when you're fishing your fly, most of the time you want to fish it on a dead-drift. A dead-drift is a perfect float where the fly is traveling at the same pace as the current. Dead-drift is used in dry, nymph and some streamer fishing (or mimicking a bait fish) and is achieved with an aerial or water mend. An aerial mend is where you'll be casting while mending your line in the air. A water mend is where you cast and mend your fly line up or down stream to keep the natural presentation of a dead-drift.

Start with an assortment of flies by going to a local outfitter or retail store and asking for advice based on the type of fish you want to fish. You can also reach out to United Women on the Fly and they can help provide some ideas where to start. You can also look at the local fishing report at the fly shop. Store your flies in fly boxes to keep you organized.

Fly casting

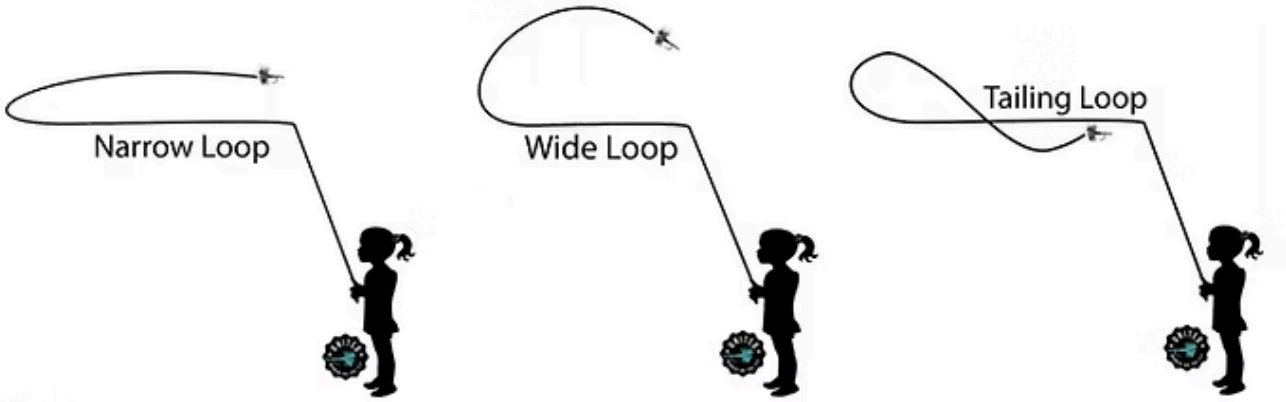
First and foremost, you have to practice. The more you practice casting, the better angler you'll be. Orvis has many tutorials and casting videos to help you learn and grow.

When we think about casting, we think about a clock. The top of your clock is above your head, three o'clock is at your back, and 9 o'clock is at your chest area. Just like you want to drive with her hands on the wheel at 10 and 2, some say you want to cast at 10 and 2 as well.

You may hear the terms forward stroke (cast) and back stroke (cast)

Casting loops

CASTING LOOPS



Loop = Shape of the Fly Line formed by the rod tip path. There are 3 different types of loops. Narrow, Wide and Tailing.

- **Narrow Loop** – Great for windy conditions and accuracy.
- **Wide Loop** – Good to use when casting heavy flies, large dry flies, multiple flies.
- **Tailing Loop** – No advantages with this cast. Will create several knots in your leader.

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A loop is the shape of the fly line formed by the end of the rod tip path. There are three different types of casting loops:

- Narrow loop – great for windy conditions and accuracy.
- Wide loop – good to use when casting heavy flies, large dry flies, or multiple flies.
- Tailing loop – no advantages with this cast and can create several knots in your leader.

Pick-up laydown

The number one cast to learn the fundamentals of casting is the pick-up laydown. To set-up a cast with 30 feet of fly line including the leader and the fly. Below are the five steps for this cast:

1. Rod tip on the ground
2. Lift rod to 10 o'clock
3. Smoothly accelerate back to a crisp stop at 2 o'clock
4. Pause to wait for the fly line to unravel
5. Smoothly accelerate forward to a crisp stop at 10 o'clock

Fly fishing accessories

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What's next after fly fishing 101?

Spend time on the water to practice. Continue your education and learn from guides, friends, and online tutorials. Practice your fly casting, video yourself to improve on your technique, or take a casting lesson.

In 2021, SheJumps launched River School, where you can learn fly fishing through virtual events or in-person at camps.

Thank you Heather for such an amazing event and information on getting started fly flushing. Download a PDF of links shared throughout the presentation.

Getting Started